

# The political dead end of Labour Zionism

## Part 2— The convergence of the Labour Zionists and Revisionist Zionism

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*This three-part article examines the historical process that has led Israel's Labour Party to form a coalition government with Likud under Ariel Sharon, and its participation in the brutal suppression of the Palestinian intifada. Part one was published on April 5 and part three will be published on April 7.*

The Labour Zionists had generally co-operated with the British Mandate established over Palestine by the League of Nations in 1922. However, by 1938—after two years of continuous Arab unrest, not just in Palestine but also all over the region, and with the growing prospect of war with Germany—Britain became convinced that its wider interests in the Middle East depended upon the support of the neighbouring Arab regimes. It reversed its policy of limited support for the Zionists and pulled back on the 1937 Peel Commission's plans for the partition of Palestine between the Jews and the Arabs. In 1939, it proposed independence for Palestine in 10 years time, with restrictions on Jewish immigration and land purchases. The Jews were to be a minority in an independent Arab Palestine.

From then on the Labour Zionists, seeing their dream of a Jewish state disappear, abandoned the established Zionist policy of caution and gradualism and collaborated with their arch-enemies, the right wing Zionists, known as the Revisionists, who were orientated towards the fascist regimes of Germany, Italy and Poland.

Vladimir Jabotinsky, founder of the Jewish Legion and leader of the Revisionists, had never shared Ben Gurion's naïve illusion that the Palestinians would one day acquiesce to Jewish domination of their land. In a 1923 article entitled *The Iron Wall*, Jabotinsky wrote, "Zionist colonisation must be either terminated or carried out against the wishes of the native population. This colonisation can, therefore, be continued and make progress only under the protection of a power independent of the native population—an iron wall, which will be in a position to resist the pressure to the native population. This *in toto* is our policy towards the Arabs... A voluntary reconciliation with the Arabs is out of the question either now or in the near future."

Jabotinsky became increasingly hostile to what he perceived as Zionist acquiescence to Britain's disregard for its obligations to the Jews. He demanded that Transjordan, which was excluded from the British Mandate, be incorporated within the Jewish national home in Palestine. He poured scorn on the Labour Zionists, who eschewed the restoration of their own armed forces that had been disbanded at the end of World War One. "If you wish to colonise a land in which people are already living, you must provide a garrison for the land, or find some 'rich man' or benefactor who will provide a garrison on your behalf. Or else - or else, give up your colonisation, for without an armed force which will render physically impossible any attempt to destroy or prevent this colonisation, colonisation is impossible, not 'difficult', not 'dangerous' but IMPOSSIBLE! ...Zionism is a colonising adventure and therefore it stands or falls by the question of armed force. It is important ... to speak

Hebrew, but unfortunately it is even more important to be able to shoot - or else I am through with playing at colonisation."

In 1923, Jabotinsky was forced to resign from the World Zionist Organisation (WZO) when his secret agreement to follow Petlyura's ultra-nationalist and murderous Ukrainian government in exile's march into Bolshevik-held Ukraine became public knowledge. Two years later he broke with the official Zionist leadership and founded the Revisionist party, which was to become the Zionist brown-shirts. His style more and more closely mimicked the militarism of Mussolini and Hitler, although Jabotinsky never referred to himself as a fascist. "The time has apparently come when there must be a single, principle controller in the movement, a 'leader', though I still hate the word. All right, if there must be one, there will be one", he wrote in a letter in 1932.

Relations with the Labour Zionists deteriorated and it was widely assumed that the Revisionists were implicated in the assassination of Chaim Arlosoroff, the political secretary of the Jewish Agency. In 1934, Jabotinsky set up the New Zionist Organisation in opposition to the WZO, which he saw as too timid and willing to compromise. While Jabotinsky understood that the Zionists were too weak to survive without British backing, he did not intend to cling to the coattails of the British for any longer than was necessary. He was quite clear about his objectives, "We want a Jewish empire," he told a journalist in 1935.

He became convinced that the fascist dictators of Europe would be better protectors of the Zionists than the British. As Lenni Brenner explains in great detail in *Zionism in the Age of Dictators*, the Revisionists did not lift a finger to oppose the persecution of the European Jews but collaborated with the fascists in an attempt to get the mass immigration to Palestine that would make the Zionist project a viable one.

The Revisionists waged a campaign of terror aimed at driving out the British and establishing a Jewish state on the entire land of biblical Palestine, including Transjordan. With the Jews a minority in Palestine, such a state would necessarily mean expelling the Arab population to ensure its Jewish character.

This was the party with which the Labour Zionists reached an accommodation in the late 1930s. While their methods differed, their paths now converged.

### The character of the Zionist state

After World War Two, facing increasing hostility and disruption in Palestine, British policy shifted again: they proposed a bi-national state. When both Arabs and Jews rejected this, Britain referred the conflict to the United Nations, fully expecting the UN to hand Palestine back to Britain to deal with. But London's hopes of resolving the conflict on its own terms were to be thwarted.

The US was determined to supplant Britain as the dominant power in the oil-rich Middle East and control deliberations on Palestine. The Israeli historian, Ilan Pappé, explains in his book *The Making of the Arab Israeli*

*Conflict 1947-51* that this resulted in the appointment to the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) of "inexperienced members from all parts of the world who had very little prior knowledge, if any, of the regional situation". Consequently, "they proposed a Jewish state where half the population would be Arab". Like the rest of the world, UNSCOP was deeply moved by the plight of the Jews that they had witnessed during a tour of Europe's displaced persons camp. Since the US had refused in 1947 to admit a substantial number of Jewish refugees, a Jewish state seemed the only solution.

The establishment of a Jewish state was viewed with sympathy by millions of people around the world who were appalled at the catastrophe that had befallen European Jewry. The major powers, including the Soviet Union but not Britain, actively supported its establishment, but for their own purposes. They saw it as a way of blocking Britain's position in the Middle East. The UN voted for the partition of Palestine, hailing it as a new and progressive entity dedicated to building a democratic and egalitarian society for the most cruelly oppressed people of Europe.

As soon as Ben Gurion declared Israel's independence, war broke out between the Arabs and the Jews, who were able to seize more land than was included in either the 1937 or the 1947 partition plans. Although the Jews had owned less than 10 percent of the land, this had determined the pattern of Jewish settlement, which was largely urban. Israel was established on 80 percent of the land controlled by the British under the Mandate. King Abdullah of Transjordan, Britain's client state, seized the rest.

While the Revisionists' perspective had always been to seize the whole of Palestine, including Transjordan, Ben Gurion took a more pragmatic approach in relation to the size of the Zionist state. First establish a Jewish state, however small, the boundaries can always be adjusted later.

The Revisionists engaged in terrorist activities, carried out by the Irgun and the Stern gangs, and sanctioned by the Labour Zionists. This played a major role in driving the Palestinians from their homes. Ben Gurion himself encouraged the para-military Hagana, largely under the control of the Histadrut/Mapai Party and forerunner of the Israeli Defence Forces, to expel the Palestinians from their homes. The essential prerequisites for the founding of the state of Israel was the expulsion of the Palestinians, who were destined to become refugees in neighbouring countries and dispersed throughout the world, and the take-over of their land.

At the same time as it was turning hundreds of thousands of Palestinians into refugees, the new state enacted the "Law of Return," throwing open its doors for Jews all over the world to come and live in Israel. In the aftermath of the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of Jews were living in desperate conditions in displaced persons camps throughout Europe. With few countries willing to take them, Israel provided their only possibility of a home.

As well as providing a refuge for Jews, Israel also actively sought immigration to provide the manpower that was vital if the fledgling state were to survive and Jewish businesses were to prosper.

Israel's declaration of independence, although modelled on the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the American Declaration of Independence, was entirely fraudulent. The Labour Zionists who were to rule Israel for the next 30 years never gave the democratic pledges it contained any substance in law.

The Mapai/Labour Party did not develop a constitution or a Bill of Rights. It did not constitutionally separate state and religion, nor did it develop a liberal concept of citizenship extending equal rights to all. Arab citizens were placed under military law, which was only lifted in 1966. It legalised the expropriation of Arab land gained through the expulsion of the Palestinians in a series of laws that also prevent the land being returned to the original owners. Until overruled by the Supreme Court just last year, it prohibited Palestinian citizens from buying land in Israel. Furthermore, political parties that contested Israel's right to exist were

banned from taking part in elections. Until the Oslo Accords of 1993, Israel did not recognise the rights of the Palestinians to independence.

In short, Israel's existence was dependent upon the support of the US and the Soviet Union, who imposed its creation on a hostile Arab world. It had no political legitimacy. From day one, it was a country at war with its neighbours, and based on ethnic cleansing. Nationalism became the *leitmotiv* of Israeli society. The Labour Zionists instituted a regime that denied the most elementary democratic rights to its Palestinian citizens. Inequality was enshrined as the basis of its legal system.

#### **Post-independence governments under the Labour Zionists**

The Labour Zionists, through their control of the main political parties and the armed forces, were to dominate the country for the next 30 years. From 1949, when the interim government came to an end, until 1977 Israeli governments were formed by coalitions led by Mapai. Until his retirement in 1963, Ben Gurion was the dominant political figure, and served as prime minister for most of this period.

Ironically, it was the very economic and social changes that the Labour Zionists had helped to bring about that eventually eroded their social base and rendered their political programme obsolete by the mid-1970s.

Labour engineered a programme of rapid economic expansion unparalleled in the Middle East outside of the most oil-rich states. Between 1948 and 1970, Israel's gross domestic product grew at the rate of 10 percent a year, and per capita income grew at about 5 percent a year. Israel's population became increasingly urbanised. Dependence upon agricultural employment fell from 20 percent in 1948 to 6 percent in 1980. Although industrial employment remained constant at about 25 percent of the workforce, this masked the shift from small to large-scale enterprises, with the high-tech sector, diamonds and financial services becoming increasingly important.

This economic development was the product of a very specific set of circumstances: the long post-war boom, overseas grants and loans for investment and a continuous flow of immigration.

The rapid economic expansion was, in part, the result of an investment rate of 25 percent of annual income a year. However, almost none of this investment came from within Israel; virtually all was provided through foreign aid. A major source came from the Jewish Diaspora, which contributed \$200 million a year before 1967 and a massive \$700m a year in the following six years. German reparations were to provide another important source of finance in the early years: \$125m a year before 1966. Even after reparations came to an end, West German aid continued at a higher level than before.

The post-war exodus from Europe provided a highly trained professional workforce, enabling Israel to achieve considerable increases in productivity in its traditional industries, and to establish a new high-tech sector, particularly in the defence and aircraft industries. The continuous flow of Jews migrating from the Middle East and North Africa provided a pool of cheap labour that supplemented the low paid pool of Israeli Arab labour and fuelled rising domestic demand.

The Histadrut, or General Federation of Labour, retained its position as the premier economic institution whereby it served as trade union, employer, banker, savings institution, and provider of social insurance and welfare services. By 1983, it had 1.6 million members, employed more than 250,000 and ran the largest industrial enterprise, Koor Industries. Sixty percent of Israeli citizens were dependent upon its social insurance schemes. It played a vital role in managing and containing class conflict in the interests of the Zionist elite.

One of Israel's first steps was to reorganise its military capacity into an efficient fighting force. As well as serving Israel's military needs, this was seen as playing a crucial role in educating and absorbing the immigrants, imbuing them with a sense of common Israeli citizenship.

Prior to the establishment of the state of Israel, the military had been comprised of various party militias. Ben Gurion acted quickly to bring the

activities of all the armed forces belonging to his political opponents—the Revisionists, including the Irgun and Stern Gang—under his control. He brought all party militia, including Mapai's Hagana, together to create a unified national army, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) that was nominally independent of party politics. But he recruited the senior personnel from sections of the Hagana upon whom he could rely. A high proportion of IDF officers came from the 5 percent of Israelis who lived on the *kibbutzim*, a stronghold of the Labour Zionists.

The IDF was a conscript army, navy and airforce, based on two years military service for men and one year for women. In 1975, this was increased to three and two years respectively. Every year, men were required to carry out several weeks of reserve duty until they reached age 50. In addition, there was a regular component of officers and NCOs serving on fixed term contracts. The IDF relied upon a system of rapid mobilisation to produce a force that numbered 300,000 in 1967, rising to 500,000 in 1982, without any corresponding increase in Israel's population. Two thirds of the active fighting element of 174,000 were conscripts. The IDF was to become one of the best-equipped and trained armed forces in the world, and one of the few to develop its own nuclear weapons. Although much of the cost was borne by the US military budget, the burden was to shape all political decisions affecting Israel's development after 1967. Between 1948 and 1978, Israel's military budget increased at an average rate of 21 percent a year. However this figure obscures the more rapid increase in expenditure after 1967. From 6 percent of the budget in the early 1950s, military expenditure rose to a peak of 47 percent in 1976.

In 1951, Ben Gurion created intelligence services that were directly responsible to the prime minister: Mossad for foreign intelligence, Shin Bet for domestic affairs and Aman for military intelligence. Mossad soon became notorious for its involvement in illegal and murderous actions around the world in support of the Zionist state, its patrons, supporters and anyone who might prove useful.

Israel's isolated regional position meant that it was vital to secure powerful patrons in the international arena. Early on, the Soviet bureaucracy had abandoned Israel for its own internal reasons—opposing the emigration of Jewish dissidents. Ben Gurion acted quickly to secure the reparations agreement with West Germany that underpinned the Israeli economy in the early years. He led Israel out of the bloc of unaligned nations and adopted a pro-Western orientation. This led to a strategic alliance with France and Britain that strengthened Israel's diplomatic, economic and military position in the 1950s.

But Israel's real breakthrough came in the mid-1960s, when it secured the financial backing of the US at the height of the Cold War. While President Truman had backed the establishment of the state of Israel in 1947, as part of US plans to become the major power in the Middle East, Washington's attitude towards Israel was coloured by its relationship with the old colonial powers, France and Britain. In 1956, President Eisenhower had used the threat of economic sanctions to force the French and British-backed Israeli forces to pull out of Suez. It was only when Egypt, the major Arab power in the region, joined the Soviet camp that the US began to take a serious interest in Israel.

The US would eventually become by far the most important source of aid for Israel. Although before 1967, America had provided comparatively little aid (\$50 million a year), this rose to a massive \$3 billion a year by 1986 (\$1.2bn in economic aid and \$1.8bn for military expenditure), making Israel the highest per capita recipient of US aid in the world. Unlike money from the Diaspora and West Germany, 90 percent of US government assistance was provided in the forms of loans not grants, leading to an ever-increasing burden of interest and debt repayments.

By the mid 1960s, the relative political and social harmony within Israel began to break down. A high proportion of the immigrants who had come in the 1950s and 60s were from the Middle East and North Africa. They

were less educated, arriving in the main without money. They were often forced to live in the border development towns, which were largely devoid of social amenities, where they took low paid jobs and were frequently unemployed. Worse still, they bore the brunt of Israel's war of attrition with its hostile neighbours. In 1959, Moroccan Jews in Haifa rioted in protest at their conditions. Their plight continued to worsen, particularly during the recession in the mid 1960s, and was ignored by the Histadrut, which sought to moderate wage increases in the interests of the European Jews.

Social tensions within Israel mounted as the government initiated no social or economic policies to alleviate the situation. The Labour Zionists responded to the mounting internal tensions and the external conflict that was leading up to the Six-Day War of June 1967, by bringing their hated rivals, the Herut party, into a national unity government.

Menachem Begin led Herut, the successor to Jabotinsky's Revisionist Party and forerunner of the Likud. Begin had belonged to the terrorist Irgun militia and, during the 1948 war between the Arabs and Jews, led the infamous massacre at Deir Yassin, where all of the village's 254 inhabitants were killed. In his book *The Revolt - The Story of the Irgun*, Begin gloated over the massacre, "The legend of Deir Yassin helped us in particular in the saving of Tiberias and the conquest of Haifa.... All the Jewish forces proceeded to advance through to Haifa like a knife through butter. The Arabs began fleeing in panic, shouting Deir Yassin... Arabs throughout the country were seized by limitless panic and started to flee for their lives."

Herut had previously been excluded from Labour's coalition governments because of its continued demand for a "Greater Israel": the extension of the Zionist state to include all of British Mandate Palestine and Jordan. By 1967, however, its hour had come. Its expansionist demands, which the Labour Zionists had only repudiated during the struggle against the British Mandate for pragmatic reasons, now had a vehicle for their realisation. Ben Gurion's boundaries could now be adjusted.

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*See Also:*

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